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Beyond Air-Sea Battle: The Debate Over U.S Military Strategy In Asia
by Aaron L. Friedberg, Oxfordshire, United Kingdom, Routledge, 2014.
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This book focuses on the origins, challenges and future of a recently developed United States of America (USA) military concept of Air-Sea Battle (ASB) in the light of perceived threat from China, who is wielding their military doctrine of Anti-Access Area Denial (A2AD) throughout East Asia region. It also addresses the critics, concerns and suggestions surrounding ASB voiced out by prominent national security figures such as Jan Van Tol, James FitzSimonds, Wayne Hughes and Jeffrey Kline. Above all, the book sheds a light upon the writer on the military and political struggle of the East Asia region between these two powerful nations.

People's Liberation Army (PLA) through China's economic power has enjoyed quite an uninterrupted expansion after the end of the Cold War. Slowly but surely, their expansion went unchallenged by USA who was preoccupied as a coalition leader during the First Gulf War in 1991. The PLA on the other hand had an unobstructed opportunity to evaluate USA's military might in bringing down Saddam Hussein to his knees, by watching its precision aerial bombing, accuracy of coordination between its allies and naval power projection. PLA then realised that they need to re-evaluate their military doctrine. USA's decisive win in obliterating Iraq as one of the most formidable military forces in the world by way of technology advancement has inspired, if not sowing fear, in PLA's strategists that changes must be made immediately. From there, PLA kept watching and learning from what USA did throughout two other major conflicts, namely the Taiwan Straits Crisis and Kosovo.

The writer is of the opinion that ASB is a flawed product of USA's military strategist who were caught by surprise by the comprehensiveness of PLA's A2AD. PLA has seized its golden opportunity to extensively develop A2AD while USA's forces were busy fighting their wars somewhere else. By the time that USA decided to realign their priority to East Asia, PLA has already developed A2AD to assert their territorial and sovereignty claims. USA realising that they have overlooked A2AD as a threat in their power projection in East Asia, hastily compiled ASB as a new concept weakly aimed at defeating A2AD. As commented by Bernard Cole, ASB is "in 2013 remained very much a concept, with no written doctrine, proven technology, or demonstrated operational feasibility" (Gady 2015, *The Diplomat*). It is also worthy to note that since 2001, China has advanced exponentially in cyberspace warfare by first learning how USA's coalition forces defeated Iraqi's air defence using malign codes. In fact, USA also acknowledged that China is significantly superior than USA in cyberspace warfare.

The strengths and weaknesses of ASB were discussed under few consistent headings namely deterrence, warfighting capability, nuclear escalation, crisis stability, long-term competition and reassurance. From these analysis, the writer was able to understand the concept and aim of ASB. At the same time, the writer was also able to criticise the miscalculations of ASB. Nevertheless, this book has not discussed in detail the threat posed by A2AD against the USA's forces in the East Asia region. The writer is of the opinion that the analysis should be done in head-to-head comparison basis in order to further understand ASB's weaknesses and opportunity of improvement against A2AD. On the other hand, the sentiment of downplaying the sharp edges of ASB might be seemed as USA's attempt to shield its ability against the Chinese. Furthermore, in order to present a clearer picture of ASB's execution, the focus of the discussion must also be given to what are the roles of USA's allies in the region such as Japan and South Korea. Being a longstanding USA's allies for decades, one cannot simply deny that USA will need serious commitment from both of them in navigating against China's A2AD. As USA's geographical factor will come into play should war erupts with China, an insight must be given to the roles of Japan and China, if any, in suppressing A2AD threat while waiting for the main forces to arrive from USA.

Another factor which could hamper ASB's functionality is the issue of USA's fighting forces thinly spread across East Asia and Southeast Asia which poses serious trouble in stopping China, given their limited inventory and warfighting capabilities. Focus on the alternatives to ASB was also put forward with the purpose of deterring PLA's mobilisation and paralysing China's economy, namely the distant blockade and the maritime denial. Nevertheless, these alternatives could put serious risk of potential diplomatic rift between USA and Southeast Asian countries because the Chinese economic sea-lane of lifeline are located here in Malacca Straits, Sunda Straits, and South China Sea. There is also an issue of international military forces coordination in terms of what is the most effective period of time to ensure successful operation, and how to tackle the threat from Chinese fleet of submarines in giving credible possibilities of distant blockade and/or maritime denial. At the same time, it is quite mysterious as to why the importance of nuclear war was omitted from ASB, as it is a trump card for both China and USA.

The writer could surmise that ASB is a far-reaching solution against A2AD. In order to have a fighting chance, USA must also start to focus in developing its cyberspace warfare capability, which China has quite mastered since 2011. Although USA's strategists keep denying that ASB is directed towards defeating A2AD, it is apparent that it is actually the real intention. The writer also found that throughout Chapter 2, 3 and 4 there are so many presumptions made by American strategists on what PLA would or would not do; whereas compared to A2AD the Chinese strategists have a crystal clear plan on what action should be taken to maximise their doctrine's effectiveness. This further suggest that ASB concept will not be able to withstand A2AD, should USA and China are at war. In a more interesting note, on January 2015 the Pentagon has dropped the ASB from its operational concept, and replaced it with Joint Concept of Access and Manoeuvre in the Global Commons (JAM-GC) which in a way acknowledged the shortcomings of ASB.

References

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